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PLENARY ADDRESS

14th National Service-Learning Conference "Weaving the Fabric of Community: A Celebration of Service-Learning"

*By Elizabeth Burmaster, State Superintendent of Public Instruction
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Good morning! Thank you, Jim Keilsmeier and the National Youth Leadership Council (NYLC), for that nice introduction and for inviting me to speak before this wonderful audience.

And I want to thank the many organizations that made this conference possible.

It is an honor to join you today and to greet so many representatives from Learn and Serve America and other service-learning projects—AmeriCorps, VISTA, Senior Corps, higher education, and community- and faith-based organizations. What a fantastic group.

It is especially rewarding to see the number of students participating in the conference. You are our future, and service-learning is student-centered, with a vision of youth empowerment that will ensure a stronger and more viable America.

Our vision will be realized through our collective belief and passion in service to community and in giving youth a voice. Together, we truly are "United in Service"!

I came to the office of state superintendent of public instruction in Wisconsin straight out of the schools. I spent 25 years in education with experience as both a teacher and administrator at every level—elementary, middle, and high school. I taught music and drama in elementary and middle schools before becoming choral and drama director at Madison East High School in Wisconsin.

It was as a music and drama teacher that I first discovered the power of hands-on experiential learning. My students were a great inspiration to me as I saw them use the arts to connect to their community; to examine racism, gender, and class issues; and to work in collaborative leadership to enhance the lives of others. My students at East High gave voice to their beliefs and dreams, and I learned far more from my students than they from me.

As Wisconsin's elected state superintendent of public instruction, I have the privilege of bringing that voice of my students who inspired me so many years ago and my many years of experience and service as a principal to the role of shaping statewide policy, advocacy, and leadership in PK-16 education.

It is a great privilege to work to bring people and communities together around our shared value and responsibility to put our children and their education first. Therein lies my passion for service-learning.

I love the theme of our conference, "Weaving the Fabric of Community." It brings to mind beautiful images of layers of colors, images of the active engagement of weaving—of spinning the threads—that come together to create a work of beauty.

A democratic society comprised of diverse, civically engaged communities truly is a work of art that must be cherished and nurtured through citizenship that strives for the ideals of justice, equality, and peace.

The future of those ideals is dependent on a thriving democracy and education system where academic success is accessible to all students regardless of the economic or education level of their parents or their race, ethnicity, or language they speak at home.

Benjamin Franklin said, “Tell me and I forget, teach me and I remember, involve me and I learn.”

Service-learning is the most effective educational strategy for the application of knowledge learned in school to the real world and for the civic engagement of students in their communities where they learn through authentic hands-on involvement what it means to be a productive, contributing citizen of a democracy.

Education reform of the last 20 years has focused primarily on accountability for student performance in meeting academic standards and ensuring young people are prepared for higher education and the workplace.

This reform movement has culminated in federal legislation, the No Child Left Behind Act, which will identify and label schools based on standardized assessment of academic standards.

Little attention has been paid to what it means to prepare young people to participate fully in a democracy, to go beyond mere knowledge of government to include the development of skills, attitudes, and dispositions needed to sustain and renew traditions of self-governance.

Where is the accountability for the democratic and civic mission of schools?

Where is the accountability for schools creating a “morally coherent community” that is a microcosm of democracy, reinforcing democratic rights and responsibilities?

Where is the call to ensure that the education system models democracy in the classroom, school, and school system?

If we thought we were “A Nation At Risk” in 1983, we are indeed a nation at risk today, as we navigate the tough waters of balancing our civil liberties with the needs of homeland security and young people called upon to serve their country in war across the globe.

Service-learning is the educational reform that can ensure that all children have the experiences that will help them become outstanding citizens, contributing to their community and country. Service-learning is our most effective vehicle to reform education!

Imagine, every morning, 180 days a year, 42 million students go off to school, but going to school now means students are not only studying and going to school for their own success but learning to transcend their own individual interest and embrace the interests of others in their community.

How can this be? Service-learning can be an incredible engine for change.

William Butler Yeats once stated that education is not the filling of a pail but lighting the fire of curiosity. Think of service-learning as a fire—a fire to learn, to discover, and to serve. Take that gnawing in your soul for things to be different and imagine for a moment that all teachers in our country fully understand service-learning and integrate service-learning into their teaching every day.

Imagine principals and other school administrators helping teachers find ways to make service-learning happen. They can direct staff development dollars to help teachers understand and use service-learning.

Administrators can also help with transportation logistics and organization of the school day to alleviate or eliminate barriers to successful service-learning.

Imagine school board members understanding the potential of service-learning and making sure board policies reflect a positive and supportive approach to service-learning, rather than impeding or discouraging teachers and students from implementing quality service-learning because there isn’t the time, the money, or the proof that it works.

Imagine state standards and local curriculum that focus on real-life learning with reflection as a key element of the learning process.

Imagine parents and other community members getting excited about participating with their children in learning and understanding what the curriculum is about. Imagine, too, parents and other citizens serving side-by-side with students as mentors and models to good citizenship in intentional acts of compassion and service.

Imagine state legislators understanding the value of service-learning and passing legislation that provides resources for service-learning PK-16.

Imagine Congress and the president talking about service-learning as a proven method of educating our children and schools labeled as in need of improvement if they don't embrace service-learning.

Imagine it is April in the year 2013, and we are just hearing the results of 10 years of educational reform that had as its core service-learning. The results are in:

- More students are reading well and doing math better than ever. Students have expressed powerful personal transformations as they see how literacy and mathematics enhance their productivity.
- More students are making changes in their communities and enrolling in postsecondary education or training.
- More students are involved in government and actively participating in their communities, and our young adults are going to the polls to vote.

Participation and diversity of thought have replaced cynicism and exclusion in politics. Public service to community is the practice of the majority, not just the commitment of the few.

All of these musings can and must happen if we are to ensure that *truly* no child is left behind in a democracy.

Teachers, parents, students, policymakers, and administrators must work together to bring relevance to academic, social, and emotional learning by engaging young people in their own learning, empowering the voice of young people and invigorating the vision of democracy through service to one's community.

I believe America has reached phase one in service-learning. That is, a large threshold/audience has experienced or heard of service-learning. More than 1 million students were involved last year through Learn and Serve America alone. However, we must systemically build on these efforts.

Now, we must take service-learning to the next level. High-quality service-learning delivered for our students and youth must be a rigorous and sustained process!

High-quality service-learning means:

- Teachers well-trained in service-learning methodology, infusing the methodology across the curriculum;
- Teacher-student reflection before, during, and after the service;
- Service closely linked to the curriculum/standards;
- Needs assessment for meaningful service; and
- Student engagement and voice in the conscious act of planning and implementation of the curriculum.

This can only be done if we develop broad-based partnerships at the local, state, and federal levels to ensure our current and future teachers are trained in service-learning.

Parker Palmer, who will speak at lunch today, is from Madison, Wis., I have heard him speak beautifully on so many occasions. He captures it so eloquently in these words:

"One of the major challenges in educational reform is for teachers—who see themselves as working in service to the young—to see themselves also as leaders in service to our schools and society. By embracing a larger leadership role, teachers will not dilute, but deepen, their commitment to children and youth. If more and more educational leaders were to rise from the ranks of teachers, transforming both our schools and the way our society supports them, the ultimate beneficiaries would be our young people, the most precious asset any society has."

And so, I want to leave you with those thoughts and a challenge.

First of all, it is important to make the first changes in areas you have some control over, that is, your daily lives and how you choose to live your life.

If you are a student, help another student participate fully. Look over your shoulder and bring a younger person along. Define yourself by your center, not your boundaries.

If you are a teacher, start today integrating high-quality service-learning into your curriculum. Create a classroom community that presumes that the good of all is inherently tied to the value of each individual. Provide opportunities for your students to see how they *can* make a difference.

If you are an administrator, find ways to reduce the barriers to service-learning in your schools. Participate yourself. Roll up your sleeves and lead by example.

If you are from a community- or faith-based organization, find that first or second school partner and focus on the social responsibilities you have in common.

If you are in higher education, challenge yourself to reach college students through action research projects and connect college students with the PK-12 system where they are attending college.

Each of us is making a difference for the good. Together, we can become the change we wish to see in the world.